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THE PROGRESS OF MANKIND ONWARD AND UPWARD FOREVER

BOSTON
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1911

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Sermons of James Freeman Clarke

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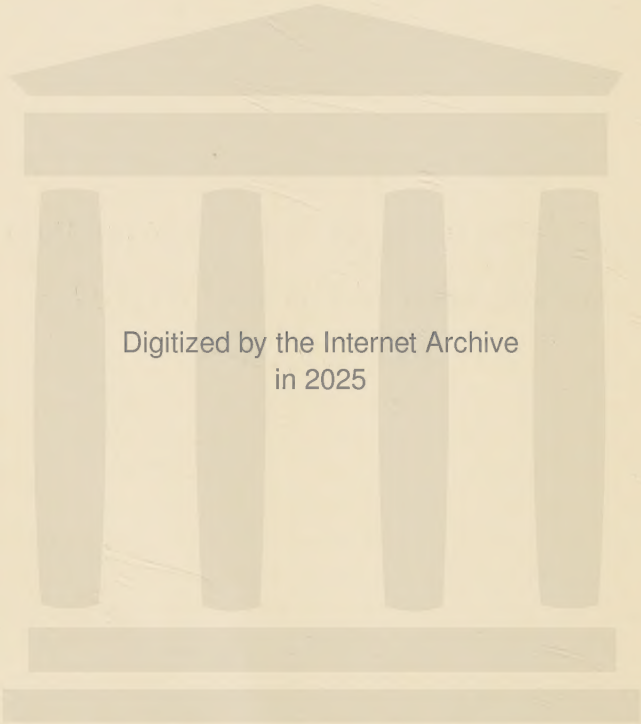

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THE PROGRESS OF MANKIND ONWARD AND UPWARD FOREVER.

ASSUMING the existence of God and of a future life, we ask, What are the probable conditions of that existence? We have only two sources of information: one must be found in the analogies of this life, the other in the teachings of inspired men.

Since this world and the world to come both proceed from the same Creator and since he is the same always, we may properly conjecture what he will do for us hereafter, from what he does for us here. Our reason teaches that the divine laws are unchanging and universal; founded on no caprice of will, but rooted deeply in the nature of things. This world is a revelation of God's character, and his character remains the same forever. The next world must reveal the same character; and no manifestations of God there can contradict, though they may complete, his manifestations here. Whatever there is in that world new and different, it must be in essential harmony with all in this.

First, then, we may assume that space and time will continue, as the necessary conditions of the existence of finite things and the taking place of finite events. By means of space, things are kept apart and distinct; by means of time, events are kept apart and distinct. As

long as anything finite continues, it must be framed in space and time. Take away space and time, and all things would rush together into the infinite and eternal. A universe, as distinct from God, requires the assumption of a space and time; and we may assume their continuance hereafter, either as realities or as necessary forms of thought,—it does not matter which.

If space and time continue, then we shall be somewhere, and not everywhere; in some place, and not in all places, just as we are now. People sometimes imagine that, after death, we shall have no more locality, but be in all places at once. But we cannot think that we, or any being, except God, will ever be omnipresent. That is an attribute of the Infinite Being, not of finite beings. As finite beings, we shall be somewhere, and not everywhere. We do not mean by this to say that we shall necessarily be tied to one place or be unable to move from one to another. We see a progress and ascent in this respect here. Trees are rooted to the soil; some animals are fastened to certain localities. Man is limited to this one planet, Earth, but can come and go on all its surface. By means of electricity and steam he is gradually making himself at home in all parts of the globe. Hereafter, in the next state, he may be able to move with a thought from place to place, to be in a moment where he wishes to be. He may be able to think himself from the Sun to Jupiter or Saturn. But he must be in some place at each moment, not in all places. So also it would seem that he must be in some point of time at each moment. In this life the stream of time carries us all forward together. So, I conceive, it will be in the future. We can, indeed, by a wonderful power of

memory and imagination go backward and forward, and then the past or the future rises before us. So, hereafter we may be able more wonderfully still, to live in past or in future time, be present in spirit at the creation of worlds, be present and look on at the most interesting moments of human history. We may be able, by an act of will, to transport ourselves backward a thousand years, and go into a village of Europe in the ninth century, and see the actual condition of knights and serfs. We may be able to assist at the Crusades or to see Mohammed in his cave, when flying from Mecca. We may be able to go back and stand by the cross, and look in the face of Jesus, and hear with our own ears his blessed words of forgiveness; or, in the early Easter morning, see him when he comes from the tomb. We may be able to go farther still,—to the Egyptian, Persian, Hindu civilizations; listen to Confucius talking with his disciples, visit Abraham in his tent, see what the deluge of Noah really was, and learn whether there was one Adam or many; for this would, after all, be only an extension or increased degree of powers we already possess, and would not be more wonderful, essentially, than any act of memory. To be able to look at the past is, indeed, not more strange than to be able to see the present.

Here let us consider that, according to analogy, our entrance into the other world, out of this, will not be abrupt or startling. Think how gently we are introduced into this life. Thousands and tens of thousands of human beings find themselves existing in this wonderful universe, and are not surprised at it. They have come from nonexistence into existence, and take it as a matter of course.

No subsequent change that can befall any of us can be as amazing as this change from nothing to something. If I can bear this without wonder, methinks I can bear anything. The greatest of all wonders is, that we do not wonder at beginning to be. We are so immersed in outward, visible objects, so full of active life, that we cannot stop to be astonished.

By what wonderful provision is it that God softly rocks us into being, tenderly leads us over this terrible and astounding fact of our passage from nonentity into actual existence? We may be sure, at all events, since we have not been astonished by this, nothing will ever be too startling. No change from something to something else can ever be so extraordinary as the change from nothing to something.

But we must not conceive of ourselves as lonely, isolated beings hereafter, not belonging anywhere. We must observe that the law of progress here, while it gives more freedom on one side, gives more permanence on the other. Man has greater freedom of movement than the lower animals. He can come and go as they cannot. But he also has more of a home than they have. They have their nest, their hole, their companions; but he has his house, his family, his relations, friends, and companions, his place of work, his sphere of activity and love. Now, it is probable, from analogy, that this will be the case hereafter. So Jesus intimates: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you." Jesus seems to have gone to prepare a congenial place, a sympathetic society; to call together in one divine mansion elect spirits who would be ready to receive his disciples when they should enter

that world, so that, when they passed in, they would be welcomed at once into a blessed company of friends assembled to receive them.

If God makes this preparation for every animal and plant born into this world, will he not have our homes prepared for us, so that we shall not enter into a strange or lonely world hereafter? Let us look forward to a glad awakening in the other world. Let us expect to find ourselves received into a home there, among groups of friends, wiser, nobler than ourselves, so that among them we shall be once more like little children, to be guided, taught, led, tenderly cared for. As we open our eyes in the new life, we shall look into answering eyes of gracious tenderness and heavenly radiance. Soft voices will murmur welcome. As mothers here purr and coo and sing cradle-songs to their infants, so the first sounds which enter our ears hereafter may be the same sweet voices of musical love. There will be nothing abrupt, strange, or startling. As we find ourselves in this world without any amazement and take it as a matter of course that we should be here, so we shall not be astonished at arriving at the next stage of being.

Our homes hereafter will probably be a step in advance of our homes here in being adapted more perfectly to our higher wants. Many families in this life, while full of natural affection, do not meet in any full affinity or high communion. They do not always understand each other. With the most conscientious purposes, they are often unjust to each other. With the best intentions, they often fail of comprehending each other's real motives. Thus there may be perpetual friction,—the sense of hindrance in one's home, and not help. These are the tragedies of

life,—persons who are brought together by birth, by habit, and by natural affection, who yet do not meet intimacy of mind and heart. Perhaps the homes hereafter will be arranged according to deeper affinities than these. Those who belong to each other will come together. Then each will contribute to the common peace and progress, and there will be that real communion which consists in perfect sympathy and mutual understanding.

Nor need the old relations cease when these new ones begin; for these came from a deep root. All love is of God, and will endure. We need not fear that our friend whom we have loved so much here will leave us there for some higher society with which he has more affinity. We sometimes hear this fear expressed, that our friends may have gone up so far as to have passed quite away from our reach. But can we fail to see that it is the nature of Christian love to be able to come down in deeper sympathy with all below, as it ascends in fulness of life to loftier attainment above? Jesus Christ, the loftiest of all souls ever seen on earth,—with whom did he commune, whom did he love, whose society did he choose? Babes in intellect, infants in virtue, publicans and fishermen, Martha, Mary, Lazarus. Not many wise, not many noble, were chosen by him, but persons standing on the lowest plane of spiritual attainment. They were honest, unperverted, pure in heart, that was all. And when he rose, and ascended to his Father, did he leave them behind? No; but he said: "I go away, and come again to you. I will not leave you comfortless. I will come again, and receive you to myself; that where I am there ye may be also." If the homes hereafter are higher homes than these, they are still made

for us, that we may go into them, and be lifted by them to a higher life.

It will be observed that we have assumed, all along, that the future life is an advance on this one, and an advance of which we shall all have the advantage. This is the lesson of analogy and also of revelation.

So, in the resurrection, as everything else ascends to a higher plane, our love must ascend, too. It will be a higher, purer, deeper, larger love. It will be less self-seeking and more generous. It will reach out more widely, and sympathize with a greater variety of God's creatures. It will go down more deeply, to seek and save the lost ones. It will rise up in a purer aspiration to God. But, because it does all this, it will not lose its hold on its old friendships, for it never does that in this world. To go up spiritually is not to go away from any one. To go up nearer to God is to acquire the power of going down with him into the lowest parts of creation. The perfection of God consists in his power of going down into the infinitely small, as well as up into the infinitely great. Christ rose higher than any other being, and so was able to sympathize with and to love those who are too low down for any one else to love. To separate one's self from those below is not to go up as Christ went up. Consequently, if our friends have made great progress in the other world, and have become far higher than we, they have acquired thereby the power and wish to come nearer to us in sympathy and help than ever before.

We must not believe in two places only, hereafter, heaven and hell. It is not likely that all are to go either into perfect joy or unmitigated sorrow. This is a very

crude and irrational notion, founded on the literal interpretation of some phrases of Scripture which our prosaic theologians have not had imagination enough to understand. God has made this world infinitely diversified with every degree of being,—a long scale of musical gradations. Is God's law in this world a law of monotony? Has he a million different conditions for his creatures here, and only two there? Believe it not! The other world is, no doubt, as full of variety as this. It has an outward nature as rich in air, earth, water, light, fire, plants, vegetables, as this our familiar world, only more graceful, more lovely, more various, more sublime, more tender. So long ago Milton wrote:—

> "What if earth
> Be but the shadow of heaven, and things therein
> Each to other like, more than below is thought?"

The old theory was based on the parable of the Sheep and the Goats. It was inferred that there are only two classes in the other world,—saints and sinners; only two places,—heaven and hell. But, while each parable teaches some one special truth, all truth is not put into each parable. The particular truth taught by the "sheep and goats" is that those who have never heard of Jesus—the Gentiles, or heathen—will be judged according to their fidelity to the law in their hearts, which is a law of universal love. The essential difference between men is that they are selfish or unselfish. This parable declares that all generous, unselfish people are essentially Christians, whether they ever heard of Christ or not.

But Jesus says explicitly, and without a parable, that there are many different conditions in the other world, as

in this. The law of degrees prevails there as here. If we expect all to go into one place when we go into the other world, I think we shall be mistaken. There will be a special place for every one to be born into there, as there is here. Every child born into this world comes into a home of its own; has its own father and mother, brothers and sisters, its own nation, country, town, language; he is born in the country or city, among the mountains or by the sea, into the home of a farmer, a mechanic, a minister. One little child is born in Spain, one in India, one in New England. Each of us, as we pass into the other world, will go into a particular home there, suited to us and which we are suited for. It is said of Judas that "he went to his place," the place that suited him, the place where he belonged, the place where it was best for him to go. So the apostle Paul went to his place, the place which suited him, the place where it was best for him to go. All this is not only Scriptural, but reasonable,—so reasonable that Jesus seems to think it almost unnecessary to tell us of it. "In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you."

We are also told that, while a good deal of what we learn in this life will pass away, much will remain. "We know in part, and prophesy" (that is, teach) "in part; but when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part will be done away." But there are three great elements of life which remain,—faith, hope, and love.

The faith which abides is not any particular creed or belief; but it is that confidence in God, that trust in universal law, in the order of the universe, in a pervading, providing intelligence, in a blessed fatherly love, which is

at the root of all intellectual activity, all intellectual progress. This faith is the "substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." It is the spring of all thought, reaching out from the known to the unknown. We go into the other world believing that there is there plenty to know, that the laws of nature and the facts of nature are infinite and inexhaustible; and that this faith is to abide in us, proves that the other world is like this world in its inexhaustible opportunities for knowledge. There, as here, there will be infinite variety, boundless adaptation, facts of observation for the senses, beauty for the imagination, problems to be studied, deeper mysteries of science. There will be something corresponding to sunlight, to stars and moon, to ocean and mountain, to forest and meadow, to summer and winter. This little world has not exhausted the creative power of God. We here see but the border of his works, and listen to but a faint whisper concerning him.

Faith abides, and so also hope abides. And, if so, there is something to hope for; that is, there is progress hereafter as well as here. When God puts hope into the human heart, it is a promise of progress. When we are told that hope abides, it is a promise of perpetual progress. To give us hope, with nothing to hope for, would be to deceive us. But the hope of something better is the spring of activity. Therefore, in the other life there is not only plenty to know, but also plenty to do. What the work is, we do not know; but, as the other world is a higher world, so the work there is higher than here.

It would seem as if much of human work in this world is merely a training of our power of work on unimportant

labors, to prepare us for those of real value. If we have been faithful over a few things, we shall be rulers over many things. Ninety-nine hundredths of human labor here is directed to procuring food, clothing, and shelter for the body. We might have easily been made so as to need neither food, clothing, nor shelter. All creatures have to work for the first of these objects, some for the first and last: man has to work for all. Is not this intended to train his working powers, so that they may be exercised on something higher?

Lastly, we are told that love abides; and, if love abides, the objects of love must also abide. The continuance of our human love is one of the best evidences, not only of immortality, but also that we are to know our friends again, and be with them again, in the other life. Else why this undying memory of our loved ones, this aching void never filled?

The animals have an intense love for their little ones, but after a few days they forget them. They are better off than we are, if we are not to meet again those who have left us. The cow mourns her calf for a day or two, and then an end. But, after twenty, thirty, fifty years have gone, the father remembers, with a pang of longing, his little child, the mother carries her infant in her heart till she goes to meet it. We may change toward the living, but not toward the dead. Living friends may be false to us, or we to them, but—

> "The love where death has set its seal
> Nor age can chill, nor rival steal,
> Nor falsehood disavow."

If we had no other reason for believing it, then the fact of this deep-rooted love and this incurable sense of loss, "this scar of a deep-stabbed woe," should be enough to convince us of the recognition and new communion with those who leave us. But, if in the other world we did not remember our friends, there would be no reason to believe we should remember anything. When the old man's memory goes, from the decay of his body, he forgets dates and names, forgets recent facts, forgets recent acquaintances; but the last things he forgets are those whom he loves. If, therefore, we should not remember our friends hereafter, I think we should not remember anything, and, if we did not remember anything, it would be no immortality of the soul, no continuation of the same personal life.

In this world we can only look on nature from the outside: perhaps then we shall be able to see it from within. Have we not all had the feeling—in looking at the ocean, at mountains, at a summer landscape, at the midnight sky—of something which we long to get at, but cannot, hidden within and behind what we see?

Wordsworth continually refers to this instinctive longing which we have to penetrate nature, to go below its surface. We have senses here by which we perceive the sensible phenomena of nature,—the beauty of form, grace of motion, color, light and shadow, perfume, music. In the other world we may have other faculties given us by which to perceive other phenomena which are now absolutely hidden for want of some perceptive faculties. There may be whole worlds of phenomena hidden in nature, which will open upon us when we have a spiritual body

with new senses, just as the world of form and color would open on a man born blind or the world of melody open on one born deaf, if these senses should be suddenly awakened.

This, I think, is what Paul means by resurrection of the body. It is the rising up of the body, the ascent of bodily life, the access of new bodily powers. Every year in a thousand churches the resurrection of the body is spoken of as though it meant the same material particles rising again out of earth. But this is a low material, earthly view of the doctrine. "Flesh and blood shall not inherit the kingdom of God, neither corruption inherit incorruption." "That which thou sowest," Paul distinctly declares, "is not that body which shall be." The resurrection of the acorn is an oak: it rises up in a higher form. So man rises up from the grave in a higher form. "It is sown in corruption,"—that is, in a decaying form,—"it is raised in incorruption,"—that is, in a body which will not decay. "It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power." The resurrection of the body is the rising up or advance of the bodily organization of man from corruption to incorruption, from weakness to power, from dishonor to glory, from a body which weighs down the soul to one which expresses it, manifests it, and obeys it entirely.

When we say that the future life is a higher condition than this to all men, we do not mean that every man there is better and happier than every man here. The sphere of a man in this world is higher than that of a dog, yet some dogs may be better and happier than some men. But, if the souls of animals ever become men that will be a resurrection, a rising up to all of them. All, good and bad, will rise to a higher plane of being and higher conditions

of existence. In the same way we may believe that all men will rise, at death, into a higher plane of being and higher conditions of existence. Not that all go into heaven, nor all into equal and eternal happiness, but all go up and on into a higher sphere. It is a rising up to judgment as well as to joy, a rising up to the sight of God's truth and holiness as well as to that of his love. Still, it is rising up. The soul which has deadened itself here, hardened its conscience to the truth, convinced itself that there is no God and no future, rises out of that degraded state when it comes to see the great realities of eternity. It rises to condemnation, remorse, shame, but it rises. Better for it to see the truth, no matter how hard it is to bear, than to remain forever blinded to it. So all that are in their graves shall hear the voice of the Son of man at last, and come forth,—come out of the graves of unbelief, of selfishness, of sensuality, of falsehood in which they have buried themselves, or out of the soft sleep of a life spent in faithful and generous toil. They shall all hear the voice of "the Man," the human voice of Christ, and shall ascend to a higher plane of truth and love. Therefore, even to those who go into the other world selfish, impenitent, hardened, and without any sense of religion, it is an ascent; for they go to judgment, to see themselves and to see the truth. They have hardened themselves against the truth in this life; they have closed their eyes, and shut their ears and hardened their hearts here, until it has become impossible for them to be converted and healed. But, when they enter the other world, all is changed. The illusions of this world pass away. They can no longer deceive themselves. They see themselves as they are and

God as he is. This is really progress, advance, —the only and essential progress.

The resurrection of the body does not mean that the same body comes to life again, as many foolishly suppose. Paul says, "Thou fool, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain." The analogy of seed and plant was given us to help us to understand this. You take some poor, black-looking, dried-up seed, and put it into the earth. Now it begins to grow. It puts out its two little leaves above; it moves into the air and light. Exquisite, delicate leaves unfold and swing gently in the soft air. A bud arrives, and swells, and opens into a lovely flower. That is the resurrection of the seed. It is not the same seed coming back again, but something higher coming out of it.

Common sense and common observation teach that all things are advancing, that the law of the universe is perpetual progress. The latest theory—that of Mr. Darwin—seeks to legitimate by science this universal law. The central idea of Darwin is that only the best things survive, so that all nature is constantly going up from good to better. It is a theory of hope. To be sure, it is not science; for science is knowledge, and this is theory. But, so far as it goes, it goes in the steps of revelation, and preaches the law of hope and progress.

Christianity, in its Scriptures, does not enter into the details of future existence as other religions do. The Persians, the Brahmans, the Egyptians, describe minutely the state and occupations of the soul in the other world. All this Christianity leaves untold: its revelation is for this world. It brings God to us here. If we feel his presence

and his love now, we shall have no doubt about immortality. God, who has made this world so rich and so fair, who has arranged it so for all our needs and wants, who has given us here so much to know and love and do,—he will take care of us also there. Christ makes us believe in immortality, not by telling us about its details, but by filling us with faith and trust in God. So he strengthens and quickens into fuller life the natural instinct of immortality.